

Accidental Drug Poisoning, Adult

Accidental drug poisoning happens when a person accidentally takes too much of a substance, such as a prescription medicine, an over-the-counter medicine, a vitamin, a supplement, or an illegal drug. The effects of drug poisoning can be mild, dangerous, or even deadly.

What are the causes?

This condition is caused by taking too much of a medicine, illegal drug, or other substance. It often results from:

- Lack of knowledge about a substance.
- Using more than one substance at the same time.
- An error made by the health care provider who prescribed the substance.
- An error made by the pharmacist who filled the prescription.
- A lapse in memory, such as forgetting that you have already taken a dose of the medicine.
- Suddenly using a substance after a long period of not using it.

The following substances and medicines are more likely to cause an accidental drug poisoning:

- Medicines that treat mental problems (*psychotropic medicines*).
- Pain medicines.
- Cocaine.
- Heroin.
- Multivitamins that contain iron.
- Over-the-counter cold and cough medicines.

What increases the risk?

This condition is more likely to occur in:

- Elderly adults. Elderly adults are at risk because they may:
 - Be taking many different medicines.
 - Have difficulty reading labels.
 - Forget when they last took their medicine.
- People who use illegal drugs.
- People who drink alcohol while using illegal drugs or certain medicines.
- People with certain mental health conditions.

What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition depend on the substance and the amount that was taken. Common symptoms include:

- Behavior changes, such as confusion.
- Sleepiness.
- Weakness.
- Slowed breathing.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Seizures.
- Very large or small eye pupil size.

A drug poisoning can cause a very serious condition in which your blood pressure drops to a low level (*shock*). Symptoms of shock include:

- Cold and clammy skin.
- Pale skin.
- Blue lips.
- Very slow breathing.
- Extreme sleepiness.
- Severe confusion.
- Dizziness or fainting.

How is this diagnosed?

This condition is diagnosed based on:

- Your symptoms. You will be asked about the substances you took and when you took them.
- A physical exam.

You may also have other tests, including:

- Urine tests.
- Blood tests.
- An electrocardiogram (ECG).

How is this treated?

This condition may need to be treated right away at the hospital. Treatment may involve:

- Getting fluids and electrolytes through an IV.
- Having a breathing tube inserted in your airway (*endotracheal tube*) to help you breathe.
- Taking medicines. These may include medicines that:
 - Absorb any substance that is in your digestive system.
 - Block or reverse the effect of the substance that caused the drug poisoning.
- Having your blood filtered through an artificial kidney machine (*hemodialysis*).
- Ongoing counseling and mental health support. This may be provided if you used an illegal drug.

Follow these instructions at home:

Medicines

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Before taking a new medicine, ask your health care provider whether the medicine:
 - May cause side effects.
 - Might react with other medicines.
- Keep a list of all the medicines that you take, including over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, supplements, and herbs. Bring this list with you to all of your medical visits.



General instructions

- Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow.
- If you are working with a counselor or mental health professional, make sure to follow his or her instructions.
- **Do not** drink alcohol if:
 - Your health care provider tells you not to drink.
 - You are pregnant, may be pregnant, or are planning to become pregnant.
- If you drink alcohol, limit how much you have:
 - 0–1 drink a day for women.
 - 0–2 drinks a day for men.
- Be aware of how much alcohol is in your drink. In the U.S., one drink equals one typical bottle of beer (12 oz), one-half glass of wine (5 oz), or one shot of hard liquor (1½ oz).
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.



How is this prevented?

- Get help if you are struggling with:
 - Alcohol or drug use.
 - Depression or another mental health problem.
- Keep the phone number of your local poison control center near your phone or on your cell phone. The hotline of the American Association of Poison Control Centers is (800) 222-1222.
- Store all medicines in safety containers that are out of the reach of children.
- Read the drug inserts that come with your medicines.
- Create a system for taking your medicine, such as a pillbox, that will help you avoid taking too much of the medicine.
- **Do not** drink alcohol while taking medicines unless your health care provider approves.
- **Do not** use illegal drugs.
- **Do not** take medicines that are not prescribed for you.



Contact a health care provider if:

- Your symptoms return.
- You develop new symptoms or side effects after taking a medicine.
- You have questions about possible drug poisoning. Call your local poison control center at (800) 222-1222.

Get help right away if:

- You think that you or someone else may have taken too much of a substance.
- You or someone else is having symptoms of drug poisoning.

Summary

- Accidental drug poisoning happens when a person accidentally takes too much of a substance, such as a prescription medicine, an over-the-counter medicine, a vitamin, a supplement, or an illegal drug.
- The effects of drug poisoning can be mild, dangerous, or even deadly.
- This condition is diagnosed based on your symptoms and a physical exam. You will be asked to tell your health care provider which substances you took and when you took them.

- This condition may need to be treated right away at the hospital.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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